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Lispector, the Time of the Veil

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There was gauze or a kind of veil in front of my eyes . . . but in fact I was more awake than ever.

—Roberto Bolaño, *Amulet*, 31

And they said to them: do you still resist?

—I Maccabees 2:33¹

ON JANUARY 18, 2011, THE PUBLIC BROADCASTING SERVICE NEWS HOUR RAN a compelling photo in its coverage of the Tunisian uprising. The photo's background shows a large crowd, presumably of protesters, while in the foreground, we see a young man raising his right arm high in the air, and gazing intently at something outside the frame of the image. But what is most compelling about this young man is the garment he is wearing. It is a plain white t-shirt, on which he appears to have drawn, with a black marker, a clock, its hands indicating exactly 3 o'clock. And above this clock, he has written, in capital letters, the word "TIREZ" [SHOOT].

Readers of Benjamin will immediately recognize the image, and the allusion. Toward the end of his famous late essay “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin distinguishes between two concepts of time, those proper, respectively, to a clock and a calendar. The former, he writes, in contrast to the latter, measures time in a mode completely inadequate to the revolutionary concept of time with which he is concerned in his essay; and to underscore this point, he cites an event from the July Revolution, in which a certain consciousness of revolutionary time, he argues, “came into its own. On the first evening of fighting, it so happened that the dials on the clocktowers were being fired at simultaneously and independently from several locations in Paris” (2004, 395). Benjamin then makes an oblique reference to “an eyewitness,” who jotted down a rhyme (which Benjamin transcribes in French) to commemorate this event:

Who would believe it! It is said that, incensed at the hour,
Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower,
Were firing on clock faces [*Tiraient sur les cadrans*] to make the day stand
still (395)

Like Benjamin, the young Tunisian protester would seem to be harking back to this event from almost two centuries ago and insisting upon a concept of time necessary to the experience of revolution, one described by Benjamin in the very next paragraph of his essay: “[t]he historical materialist,” he writes, “cannot do without the concept of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand and has come to a standstill” (396, translation modified). In opposition to the “bordello” of historicism, the historical materialist, armed with this concept, remains “man enough [*Manns genug*] to blast open the continuum of history” (396).

At this point I want to make two observations. The first concerns the last words quoted from Benjamin: “man enough to blast open the continuum of history.” This turn of phrase might seem curious. What Benjamin is speaking about, after all, is the necessity, for any revolutionary action, of a concept of time that would stand outside of—or, to use his term, “blast open” [*aufsprengen*—everyday, commonplace notions of time. But such alternative conceptions of time have most often been associated not with men but with women.

The references here are numerous, but for the sake of time, let me simply refer to Kristeva's famous essay, "Women's Time," in which she writes that "female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations" (1981, 16). At the very least, it would seem that in order to find alternative conceptions of time to benefit the cause of revolution or resistance, one would look not to man but to woman.

Second, let us recall the manner in which the protester's "message" reaches us. The young man is not interviewed; he has not written an essay or a tract in which he would detail his thoughts about the relations between time and revolution. All we know of this man is what is written on his T-shirt. It is the young man's garment that transmits his message to us—it is by way of this garment, in other words, that we purport to see him, in this case as a "revolutionary." But by what right do we do so? The piece of clothing he wears is not "him." Or is it? How are we to understand the relationship between this man and what covers him, what cloaks him . . . what veils him?

This essay will explore the questions outlined above—questions concerning time, resistance, and femininity—by way of a reflection on the veil. I will argue that there is a certain temporality inherent to the veil, what we might call a temporality of resistance; and I will make this argument through the reading of a novel: Lispector's 1977 work *The Hour of the Star*. The idea of examining a novel about a woman, written by a Jew from an overwhelmingly Christian country, to address a series of questions given to us by an image of a young man in an overwhelmingly Muslim country, may strike many as questionable. But it is precisely these distinctions that I seek to break down or at least call into question, distinctions by way of which we view the veil as solely a feminine or solely a Muslim issue, as though the concept of the veil had not haunted all of Western thought from its very beginnings. I would like to imagine a question posed by Lispector both to the young man from the news report and to Benjamin, a question dealing precisely with the concept of a revolutionary time. A question posed by a woman writing about a woman, through an intermediary—a narrator—who is a man. A woman, a man, who ask, not against but with Benjamin: "Are you woman enough to blast open the continuum of history?"

On the surface (but it is this very surface that is in question here: one of the aims of this essay will be to question the privileging depth over surface), Lispector's novel has very little to do with the veil: it is not one of the ostensible themes of the book, and none of the characters are veiled women. The novel, as is well known, tells the story of a young woman from the Northeast of Brazil who has migrated to Rio de Janeiro—emigrated, one could say, for it is almost like moving to a different country—and earns a meager living as a typist. This woman is given the strange name of Macabéa by Lispector's narrator, and as soon as we read this name, we are on a terrain of resistance: the Maccabees, of course, were a Jewish rebel army who wrested control of Judea from Hellenic rule and were martyred for their cause.² Would Lispector's Macabéa be the descendant of this rebel group, the inheritor of their cause—of a revolt against the invading Greeks, but also against those Jews, primarily the inhabitants of the city, who in positing the Hellenic tradition as a model to emulate, sought to abandon the traditions of their forebears?³ If we can trace her lineage thus, Macabéa would seem at first glance to betray her ancestors: the novel tells us again and again that she is decidedly apolitical. And yet the name insists: Nelson H. Vieira notes that the name "Maccabees" means "hammer-headed," and would thus "represent the will of those who never lose their faith" (1996, 142).⁴ In the name of what, then, is Macabéa obstinate? On what does she insist?

We would like to pose these questions directly to Macabéa, to simply ask her for a response. But here we run into our first obstacle, one that tells us that our concern with the veil might not be so misplaced after all. For the novel seems to insist, again and again, that any direct access to Macabéa is impossible; it insists on a kind of invisibility, or perhaps voicelessness, that would be proper to Macabéa, even in the very narrative that purports to tell her story. The text tells us this in several different ways. First, it chooses as its narrator not a woman but a man. He introduces himself toward the beginning of the novel with this simple statement: "I, Rodrigo S.M." (1992, 13). His name is perhaps unimportant, since he claims that "what I am writing could be written by another" (14). But immediately he qualifies this statement: "but it would have to be a man for a woman would weep her heart out" (14). Only a man could write this story, a story that, Rodrigo insists, must be "cold and impartial . . . devastatingly cold" (13).

Macabéa's story will thus be told through the voice of another; the only way we will catch a glimpse of her is by way of his words. But this is not the only obstacle to our view of her. There is also the fact that there is nothing at all special about Macabéa. Rodrigo insists on this again and again (indeed, it often frustrates him): Macabéa is simply one of the crowd.

There are thousands of girls like this girl from the North-east to be found in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, living in bedsitters or toiling behind counters for all they are worth. They aren't even aware of the fact that they are easily replaceable and that nobody cares a damn about their existence. Few of them ever complain and as far as I know they never protest, because they don't know whom to protest to. Does this whom exist? [*Esse quem será que existe?*] (TEMP 14, translation modified)

Indeed, perhaps the main aim of Rodrigo's narrative is to find the who or whom, the *quem*, referred to at the end of the passage, whose identity the passage's penultimate sentence describes as perhaps simply not yet located, but whose very existence is called into question by the last sentence. Can the narrative somehow locate this whom, somehow render Macabéa visible?

The text, in any case, foregrounds its own difficulty to locate a language by which to describe her. Or we might say, the language by which to watch her. For this is a novel that never truly attains a direct line of sight toward its protagonist, that sees her only with difficulty, a novel whose narrator sees his protagonist only through what we seem more and more justified in calling her veils. We are dealing with a narrative that is obsessed with what conceals or covers, a narrative for which that which cloaks is as important, or more important, than that which is cloaked—in which the only way to get at that which is cloaked is by way of—through—the cloak itself.

This is perhaps strange for a novel whose protagonist's vision seems clear: she is described as having "questioning eyes," eyes that are "enormous, round, bulging and inquisitive" (26). Yet any possible vision in this narrative, regardless of the nature of the eyes that purport to see, inevitably encounters obstacles. These obstacles often serve to distort, for example when, early in the narrative, Macabéa enters the lavatory at her place of work:

She looked at herself mechanically in the mirror above the filthy hand basin that was badly cracked and full of hairs: the image of her own existence. The dark, tarnished mirror scarcely reflected any image. Perhaps her physical existence had vanished? This illusion soon passed and she saw her entire face distorted by the tarnished mirror; her nose had grown as huge as those false noses made of papier mâché donned by curious clowns. She looked at herself and mused: so young and yet so tarnished. (24-5, translation modified)

Macabéa, therefore, cannot even see herself properly in the mirror, so greatly does it distort her features; and yet this dark, dirty mirror seems to say something essential about her in the very fact that it distorts her, showing her to herself, as it does, as “so tarnished” [*com ferrugem*].

A little later, a mirror—we are not told whether it is the same one—allows her to cover herself, in a manner of speaking: “Lost in thought, she examined the blotches on her face in the mirror. . . . The girl disguised her blotches with a thick layer of white powder which gave the impression that she had been whitewashed but it was preferable to looking fallow” (26). This concealment or disguising of the face is repeated often throughout the narrative. Macabéa’s four roommates, for example, each of them named Maria,⁵ all work at a shop counter, and Rodrigo pays special attention to the specific duties of one of them who “sold Coty face powder. What a curious occupation [*mas que ideia!*]” (31).

The novel is attentive not only to creams and powders, but to the various fabrics with which Macabea covers herself, or dreams of covering herself. We are told of how, on cold nights, “shivering from head to foot under a thin cotton sheet, she would read by candle-light the advertisements [for skin cream] that she had cut out of old newspapers lying around the office” (38). And a few pages earlier, we find Macabéa wandering “into the more fashionable quarters of the city” and “gazing at the shop windows displaying glittering jewels and luxurious garments in satin and silk—just to mortify the senses” (34). Later in the novel, when Macabéa goes, for the first time in her life, for a medical examination, she states: “I’ve been told you have to take your clothes off when you visit a doctor, but I’m not taking anything off” (68); and a little later, a fortune-teller reveals to her that she will meet a rich foreigner,

stating: “he is going to show you a great deal of affection: and you, my poor little orphan, you will be dressed in satin and velvet, and you will even be presented with a fur coat!” (77).

Finally, Rodrigo describes one of the novel’s most telling moments, the moment at which Macabéa is just about to meet her first and only boyfriend, thus:

On the morning of the seventh of May, an unforeseen ecstasy gripped her tiny body. The bright, open light from the streets penetrated her opacity. May, the month of bridal veils [*véus de noiva*] floating in clouds of white. . . . May, the month of butterfly brides floating in white veils [*brancos véus*]. (42, translation modified)

These are the only occurrences of the word “veil” in the entire text, but we have already seen that the book speaks incessantly about veils and coverings of all sorts—fitting for a novel about a girl who we later find out “*has never seen her naked body*” because she is much too embarrassed” (22, emphasis mine). For all we know, indeed for all Macabéa knows, there is nothing at all behind the veil: the very existence of her body may well be a myth.

If the problem that Rodrigo has set out is that of finally being able to see or hear Macabéa, then it would seem that we have to remove these veils that constantly impede our view of her. And yet the narrative insists on the veil to the very end, for example in this enigmatic parenthesis we read on one of the last pages of the novel: “(I give the bare essentials, enhancing them with pomp, jewels and splendour. Is this how one should write? No, not by accretion but rather by denudation. But I am frightened of nakedness, for that is the final word)” (81). To get at Macabéa’s essence, her nakedness, her *nudez*, is the aim of this novel, and yet it is powerless to do anything but enhance this nakedness with “pomp, jewels and splendour.” What the narrative tells us, in this strange simultaneity of the necessity and impossibility of nakedness, is that it can only arrive at its object—at the true being or the “naked essence” of Macabéa—by way of the various veils by which it conceals her. This should not surprise us, for this logic—whereby one accesses what is behind the veil only by way of the veil—is quite simply the logic of the veil. This is the way the veil is thought, for

example, in the two most canonical reflections on the veil in the twentieth century, those of Heidegger and Fanon. It would seem that no two thinkers could be more different,⁶ and yet each, in his own way, insists that the way to understand the veil is neither to force one's way past it, nor to refrain from asking what lies beyond it: on the contrary, both Fanon and Heidegger insist that the being of that which lies beyond the veil is inextricable from the veil that conceals it.⁷ What the veil gives forth, in other words, is a certain not-seeing; remove the veil, and the "object" behind it undergoes a change in its very nature; the surest way, therefore, to misunderstand the veiled being is to simply and violently remove her veil.⁸

What Rodrigo tells us is not so much that we will never truly see or hear Macabéa, that we will never get at her "essence," that the writing will never arrive at the nakedness for which it aims, but rather that the way to see Macabéa, to finally hear or understand her protest, is by way of the veils that seem to stand in the way of this aim as obstacles or impediments. That her essence, in other words, is indistinguishable from these very veils.

And precisely because the beyond of the veil only exists through the veil, that which lies beyond the veil—Macabéa herself—is, in a way, nothing at all.⁹

This is essentially what Rodrigo tells us about Macabéa. At one point, she has an argument with her workmate, Glória, but the tension does not last very long: "[p]eace was soon restored between them, and Macabéa continued to be happy thinking about nothing. Empty, empty" (62). Macabéa seems herself to consist of a kind of void—fitting for a girl who, the narrator tells us, "did not know that she was what she was, just as a dog doesn't know that it's a dog" (27), fitting for a girl whose "life was one long meditation about nothingness" (37). And this void, this nothingness, becomes the very language by way of which Macabéa is described. At one point, we are told of a "moment of ecstasy" experienced by Macabéa. She tries to tell Glória about it, but "decided against it, she didn't know how to speak and what was there to tell? The air? One doesn't tell everything because everything is a hollow void" (63, translation modified). Macabéa literally has nothing to confide; or rather, what she has to confide is precisely the nothing—a hollow void, "*um oco nada*." This void that she does not express or tell is no doubt simply herself: the very next paragraph tells us that at times, "grace descended upon her as she sat at her desk in the office. Then she would go to the washroom in order to

be alone. . . . Standing and thinking about nothing, a vacant expression in her eyes [*os olhos moles*]” (63).

Macabéa, it would seem, is not; she is nothing rather than something. But the text tells us that this is not exactly true. For it tells us, toward the beginning of the book, that “within her there is a seclusion [*recolhimento*, also ‘gathering’],” that “in her poverty of body and soul one touches sanctity” (10). It is as though there were a something within the nothing, in Macabéa just as in “this story [which] will consist of words that form phrases from which there emanates a secret meaning that exceeds both words and phrases” (14–15). Within the nothing-words that form Macabéa and the story of Macabéa, there is something beyond the void, the *vazio*, the nothingness: a sort of secret, one that, to paraphrase Duras, cannot be spoken, but can be made to resonate (Duras 1964, 48).¹⁰

What are we to make of this nothingness onto which Lispector’s text seems to open? This *vazio* or hollow void, these holes and absences in the text, lead us to think of a certain concept, one developed specifically in the field of literary criticism, that seems to describe perfectly all these variations of nothingness: I am thinking of Blanchot’s concept of the neutral. Let us look at how he develops this concept in his essay “The Narrative Voice,” an essay that deals mainly with Kafka, but also with the text of Duras to which we have just referred. The neutral, he explains, designates a voice, not of the self or of the other, but lying somewhere between them, that speaks in the text. This voice however:

has no place in the work, but neither does it hang over it . . . [it is] rather a kind of void in the work—the absence-word that Marguerite Duras evokes in one of her narratives: “a hole-word, hollowed out in its center by a hole, the hole in which all the other words should have been buried.” And the text goes on: “One could not have spoken it but it could have been made to resound: immense, endless, an empty gong.” This is the narrative voice, a neutral voice that speaks the work from out of this place without a place, where the work is silent. (1993, 385)

Blanchot’s comments on Duras’s *mot-trou* or “absence-word” are equally rel-

evant for our discussion of Lispector's *oco nada*, the hollow void that seems to articulate itself throughout her novel, itself a kind of "*vide dans l'oeuvre*," to quote Blanchot, which is not so much a voice as a silence, or a silent voice of sorts. And this link to the neutral should not surprise us: while the term is never mentioned in *The Hour of the Star*, it is in fact a major trope in Lispector's work; for example in her great novel *The Passion According to G.H.*, the entire plot of which centers around a woman in a room gazing upon a half-crushed cockroach, whose insides seep out slowly, in a white goo, through a crack in its body. In a telling passage from this novel, the "protagonist"—again a woman, but this time from Brazil's upper classes—reflects upon "this neutral cockroach without a name for love or suffering. Its only differentiation in life is that it has to be either male or female. I had been thinking of it only as female since whatever is caved in [*esmagado*] at the middle must be female" (1988, 85).

That the neutral, this "narrative voice," is also at work in *The Hour of the Star* would seem clear from the language Rodrigo uses to narrate the novel; and indeed, the term would shed new light on Lispector's choice of a male narrator, since this choice forces us to constantly question whether it is Lispector or Rodrigo who is speaking.¹¹ But it is telling that the term "neutral" does not appear in *The Hour of the Star*, as it does so often elsewhere in Lispector's work. Indeed, I wonder if what we have already said about Lispector forces us to call into question, or at least to attempt to disturb or agitate somewhat, Blanchot's concept of the neutral, at least as it applies to this novel. We can use the passage cited above, from *The Passion According to G.H.*, as a kind of index here. Lispector's narrator begins this passage by speaking of the neutral ("this neutral cockroach"). As the passage goes on, however, we see a slight shift of register: from the neutral—beyond the neutral, as it were—we begin to see the formation of a "differentiation" (which nonetheless occurs "in the middle [*pela cintura*]"), one which moves toward the "side" of the female ("I had been thinking of it only as female").

I wonder if *The Hour of the Star* does not also, in an analogous fashion, seek to go beyond what Blanchot says about the neutral—or rather, to expose the neutral, we might say, to its own outside or its own beyond. One of the observations we can make about Blanchot's neutral is that it exists on a kind of border, occupying a strange nonspace (as is proper to any border) between

the active and the passive, but also between the masculine and the feminine, themselves so often associated with the active and the passive, respectively. Between these two extremes, the neutral, again like any border, forges a kind of third space, one that intrudes on that which it is supposed to merely separate or distinguish: an alterity that refuses its incorporation into one or the other side of the division.

The neutral would hence lie not only between but also beyond active/passive, beyond masculine/feminine. But can the term “neutral” truly be said to describe the work of Lispector’s hollow void, this *oco nada*, to which we only have access, let us recall, by way of a veil? This term, it is true, indicates a register at which nothingness speaks in this novel. But the fact that only a veil gives us access to this nothingness would suggest that the latter is not in fact ungendered. On the contrary, this nothingness, the neutral voice at work in this novel, is nothing if not distinctly feminine. And yet it is not simply a femininity of the kind we usually assume to lie in opposition to the masculine. On the contrary, what Lispector gives us to think, not in opposition to but by way of Blanchot’s neutral, is what we might call a femininity beyond neutrality: a void or a nothingness, undoubtedly, but one that would be tinged or colored (or tarnished?) by femininity, one whose silence would articulate itself in the register or the voice of the feminine. A fourth space of sorts, a border of the border, an outside of the beyond. A feminine nothingness or hollow beyond nothingness itself, and beyond its own opposition to masculinity.¹²

This is what the veil, in Lispector, reveals without revealing, reveals in concealing. What the veil (what every veil) gives forth without giving forth is an absence, a void, a specifically feminine emptiness, that one can only access without quite being able or permitted to access it. One can make out the form or the contours of this emptiness only *by way of* the constant stream of veils in Lispector’s text.



What exactly is this “seclusion” that is articulated solely by way of the veil? What is this femininity beyond neutrality that is both revealed and concealed by all the fabrics, cloaks, and coverings of the text?

What lies behind the veil, we have seen, is nothing: it is a void. But perhaps the name of this void is time.

For this is a novel that speaks incessantly of time, from the hour of the title, to the “prehistory of prehistory” (Lispector 1992, 11) of the novel’s opening passage, to the today, a today marked by oppression, humiliation, and market-based domination, and sponsored by Coca-Cola, on which the text’s narrator ruminates (23), to the “instant” in which Macabéa, having been hit by a car, dies—an instant, Rodrigo tells us, which is “that particle [*átimo*] of time in which the tyre of a car going at full speed touches the ground, touches it no longer, then touches it again. Etc., etc., etc.” (85–86). Rather than any of these times, I want to move to another temporality that is at work in the novel, a temporality that the novel keeps a secret of sorts, as we shall see.

To explore this temporality, we will have to move back to the very beginning of the novel, which opens with a lengthy dedication, followed by a list of “alternative” titles for the book. This list begins with the title that is also the “real” title of the book: *The Hour of the Star*. This title is repeated two titles down the list, right after the enigmatic “the fault is mine.” But looking a little further down the list—right after the handwritten “Clarice Lispector”—we find another reference to time, to a temporality that appears over and over in Lispector’s narrative. About halfway down the list, we read:

QUANTO AO FUTURO.

[As for the future].

But we should perhaps begin not with the words, but with the strange use of punctuation here.¹³ This is the only one of the titles listed on this page in which we find any punctuation, and we find it used in a novel way, with a period not only at the end but at the beginning of the title—enclosing, bordering or delimiting the title. The narrator makes mention of this only a few pages into the novel, in the context of a discussion of the type of story he aims to write:

A story that is patently open and explicit yet holds certain secrets—starting with one of the book’s titles “As For The Future,” preceded and followed by a full stop. This is no caprice on my part—hopefully this need for confinement

[*necessidade do delimitado*] will ultimately become clear. (The ending is still so vague yet, were my poverty to permit, I should like it to be grandiose.) If, instead of a full stop [*punto*], the title were followed by dotted lines [*reticências*], it would remain open to every kind of speculation on your part, however morbid or pitiless. (Lispector 1992, 13)

This future, or this gesture toward a future, is the most secret of all the times that traverse this book, the time that brings the story away from its otherwise “open and explicit” [*exterior e explícita*] nature and toward a kind of confinement. This secret time or tense appears often in the text, for example in discussions about whether or not it is possible to have a future. Macabéa, the narrator often suggests, does not have a future at all. “As for the girl [*Quanto à moça*],” he states at one point, “she exists in an impersonal limbo” (23); she “didn’t worry too much about her own future: to have a future was a luxury” (58); and when her office-mate Glória asks her “do you ever think about your future?” there is no response: “The question remained unanswered, for Macabéa had nothing to say” (65). It is thus unsurprising that the future is linked to secrecy, given that, for Macabéa, there is so little to say about it: at times the narrator hints that her future might be brighter than her current state gives us to hope, but then he quickly moves on to another aspect of the story.

Yet the entire narrative seems to move inexorably toward this secret future, and in fact Macabéa’s very last act is to attempt to find out about her future—to visit a fortune-teller, a *cartomante*, on the advice of Glória. It is during this visit to the fortune-teller that Macabéa’s future suddenly seems to begin to take shape: for the first time in her life, we are told, she “was about to know her own destiny” (75). At first the news is not good. “As for your present [*Quanto ao presente*], my child, that’s miserable” (75, translation modified), states the clairvoyant, but we immediately realize that she is not speaking of the present so much as the immediate future.¹⁴ She tells Macabéa that she will soon lose her job, just as she has recently lost her boyfriend. Soon, however, things take a turn for the better: the fortune-teller tells Macabéa that her life is about to change, that her boyfriend will come back to her, that her boss will decide not to fire her. At this point, for the first time in her life, Macabéa’s

relationship to the future begins to change: her “eyes opened wide as she felt a sudden hunger for the future (bang),”¹⁵ to which the narrator adds “And I, too, am beginning to cherish hope at last” (76). The fortune-teller goes on to tell Macabéa, in a passage referred to earlier, that she will soon meet a rich foreigner named Hans who will dress her in satin and velvet and present her with a fur coat.

Macabéa is utterly transformed by this visit to the fortune-teller, so much so that the narrator describes her as “a new person,” a “person enriched with a future” (79). So different is she that, upon leaving, she does not know exactly what to do: she “stood there in bewilderment, uncertain whether she should cross the street now that her life had been transformed” (78–79). The future, however, is not as it seems:

The moment she stepped off the pavement, Destiny (bang) swift and greedy, whispered: now, quickly, for my time has come!

And a yellow Mercedes, as huge as an ocean liner, knocked her down. At that very moment, in some remote corner of the world, a horse reared and gave a loud neigh, as if in response. (79, translation modified)

It is tempting to say that the fortune-teller has made a mistake: did Macabéa, approaching her house, not cross paths with a teary-eyed girl, and does the fortune-teller not tell Macabéa that she “just told that girl you saw leaving that she’s going to be knocked down in the road” (77)? Yet the narrator tells us that, even after being hit by the car, Macabéa realizes that the fortune-teller’s prophecies are coming true: the car, after all, is luxurious, and we learn a little later that it is driven by a fair-haired foreigner. And strangely, Macabéa seems at peace: lying in the road bleeding, she thinks to herself, “today is the dawn of my existence: I am born” (80). The future has arrived: there is no going back to that other time, that prehistoric time, in which she gave no thought to what was to come, to her destiny, and nothing can change the euphoria with which she has entered this new time, not even its seemingly imminent end. Lying in the gutter, she “seemed to become more and more transformed into a Macabéa, as if she were arriving at herself” (81).

There is indeed hope: we need not worry, for surely Macabéa will not die;

the narrator himself tells us as much: “To my great joy,” he states, “I find that the hour has not yet come for the film-star Macabéa to die” (82). After a few paragraphs that describe her thoughts, her emotions, her struggle to live as she lay in the gutter, we read the following:

At that instant, Macabéa came out with a phrase that no one among the onlookers could understand. She said in a clear, distinct voice:

– As for the future [*Quanto ao futuro*]. (84)

The most hopeful line of all. But these turn out to be her last words: just a few lines later, the narrator admits that he has betrayed us, that Macabéa has died.

Must we not therefore insist on the betrayal of the narrator? Has he not promised us that Macabéa would pull through (but did we ever really believe him?), that the hour of this star had not yet come? But then what is the hope that resounds throughout the last pages of the book, the craving for a future that animates these pages, the passage from a hopeless life to one that has a future? What is the future that is described here, a future lying in a gutter and awaiting its own end, its own death? What future is at stake here?

Let us look again at Macabéa’s last words: as for the future, *quanto ao futuro*. Not only do these words repeat one of the alternative titles of the novel, they also repeat the confinement or *delimitado* of the periods that surround it. For when Macabéa, lying in the street, begins to think about her future for the first time, is this future not already coming to an end, already running up against its limit? As she pronounces the word “future,” this future is already closing itself off—tiny, weak future that runs up against a period or wall in the very moment, in the very meanwhile, of its utterance.

How can we make sense of this future that is ending as it begins? We are given a clue a few pages earlier, by the narrator’s utterance of the formulation “not yet.” “To my great joy,” writes Rodrigo, “I find that the hour has not yet come for the film-star Macabéa to die” (82). The hour of the star has not yet arrived,¹⁶ and this “not yet” is key: it indicates a deferral, by which that which must come to be is put off, if only for the briefest of moments. In this deferral, we are somewhere between *quanto ao presente* and *quanto ao futuro*, in a tiny sliver of *enquanto*, or “meanwhile”; we are in that “tiny particle of time,” the

“*átimo de tempo*,” referred to on the novel’s very last page. In a time that, for the briefest of moments, puts off an ending that is *imminent*.

This temporality would thus seem to have an intimate relationship to that of messianism,¹⁷ which distinguishes itself from the empty void of commonplace notions of time through the fact that it can end—can fulfill itself, its promise—at any given moment. Yet at the same time, the present-future we are dealing with in Lispector would also comprise a kind of countermessianic time, inasmuch as the “messianic” period—the tiny dot that would close off this time and begin a new one—is not awaited or welcomed by Lispector’s narrative, but rather put off, deferred. Death must arrive soon, very soon; in a certain sense it is already there, it already exists in the form of its imminence. But the narration will nonetheless do everything it can to hold off this death, to open a tiny sliver of time in which that which is inevitable will not be permitted to arrive.

The resources that Macabéa and the narrative have to put off this arrival are infinitely poor, unimaginably weak, recalling nothing less than Benjamin’s “weak messianism”: “like every generation that preceded us,” writes Benjamin, “we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim” (2004, 390).¹⁸ With the difference, again, that for Lispector, it seems that it is the *future* that stakes a claim to the present it is already obliterating. Far from turning its back to the future, like Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, on which Benjamin famously comments in his essay, Lispector’s text confronts it with all the negligible power it can muster.

Why, if Lispector’s text seems so different from that of Benjamin, should we draw this link between them? The response lies in Benjamin’s famous concept of “now-time,” *Jetztzeit* (an everyday word in German, we should recall, simply denoting actuality). Recall that for Benjamin, now-time refers to a moment in time that escapes the homogeneity of empty, linear time—“Now-time,” he writes, “as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation” (2004, 396). It is a now that literally explodes time (and we think here of all the bangs, the *explosões*, that permeate *The Hour of the Star*), opening or exposing it outward, interrupting its linear course. Lispector—fascinated by the now throughout her *oeuvre*¹⁹—wants to make something possible in

this now that in the normal course of time would be inconceivable, to bring into being a slice of the entirely new.

What becomes possible in this moment—what does this now-time do? In order to pose this question, let us remain on the text's limit, on its very last page. Macabéa has just died, and this death seems to have given Rodrigo (who tells us, paradoxically, that he has also “just died with the girl” [Lispector 1992, 85]) a certain understanding, as he reports in the following passage:

Dead, the bells were ringing, but without their bronze giving them any sound.
I now understand this story. She is the imminence in those bells that are just about to ring.

The greatness of everyone. (85, translation modified)

Given the difficulty of this passage, I want to cite it in its entirety in the original:

Morta, os sinos badalavam mas sem que seus bronzes lhes dessem som. Agora entendo esta história. Ela é a iminência que há nos sinos que quase-quase badalam.

A grandeza de cada um.

The first thing one notices when reading this passage is the curious relationship, in the first sentence, between the single word preceding the comma and the rest of the phrase. This first word must, it would seem, refer to Macabéa (who has indeed just died)—this would seem to be confirmed by the fact that Lispector employs the feminine singular form of the adjective “dead” (*morta*). This single word is all we hear of Macabéa in this sentence, yet her death leads seamlessly into the bells that are referred to after the comma, as though what would be “sounded” in the bells were the death of this woman, or this dead woman; or (given that Macabéa's name is entirely omitted here) as though what would be sounded in the bells were simply death itself, but in a specifically feminine articulation.

Except that there is no real ringing taking place here: “the bells were ringing, but without their bronze giving them any sound,” according to

Lispector's enigmatic formulation, which sounds every bit as strange in Portuguese as it does in English. But how is it possible for bells to ring silently? The passage's third sentence might allow us to understand. "She"—and this she is no doubt both Macabéa and her story, the *esta história* of the previous sentence—"is the imminence in those bells that are just about to ring." This sentence thus provides a response to the question we posed about how bells could ring silently: the answer is simply that they have not yet rung. But again, things are more complex than they appear. For the verb "to ring," *badalar*, is written here (in its second appearance in the passage) not in the future tense, but in the present. And hence the conundrum from the earlier sentence is maintained: the bells, which have not yet rung, must already be ringing. The difficulty lies in the fact that the ringing of the bells takes place in that strange sliver of time we referred to above: the particle of time that lies somewhere between present and future. What Rodrigo tells us is not that the bells are ringing, or that they will ring: what he tells us is that the bells "*quase-quase badalam*"—literally, that the bells "almost-almost ring." We are so close to hearing the bells that we can almost, or almost-almost, make them out; they are so close to ringing that we must describe this ringing in the present—or in a tense that, following the text, we might describe as the "almost-almost future." This is the tense that is proper to *imminence*.

What is imminent, in other words—what is about to arrive—is only so because in a way, it is already here.²⁰

What is it, then, that is both arriving and arrived, that has arrived as that which is to come, only to come? We are told in the very next sentence of the passage, a sentence both more and less than a sentence inasmuch as it comprises its own paragraph but contains no verb. The sentence—what comes, what is already there—is "*A grandeza de cada um*," the greatness of us all, of everyone, of every one.

For the first time in a text that has consistently viewed her as insignificant, Macabéa attains—almost-almost attains—a certain greatness. Yet, what the almost-almost ringing bells "sound"—sound without sounding, sound silently—is not only her greatness, but the greatness of us all, of everyone, of every one. For the first time, Macabéa doesn't seem completely alone, doesn't seem completely veiled by the text, is not hidden from our eyes. Yet the place where

she—and we as well—become “perceptible” is not to be found on the register of the visual. We still do not see Macabéa, but we can perhaps “hear” her—but only if we can hear that which as yet makes no sound, that which is almost-almost sounding. That which, perhaps, is just about to sound—that whose sounding is imminent. And hence the importance of this future-present time, this unique tense of the “almost-almost future,” of Rodrigo’s version of the now-time that looks forward instead of backward. What Macabéa does, uttering “as for the future” and deferring death, is to hollow out a time in which it becomes possible for her, for the first time, to say we—a time in which, rather than comprising pure solitude, she can be said to be an “each one.”

It is precisely the veil that allows her to make such an utterance, that allows us to hear such an utterance. For what is a veil, if not that which hollows out a tiny space between a “presence” and its own fabric, lying just beyond, and without which such a hollowing—such a spacing—could not occur? And what is this space if not the relationship between this presence—this present—and its beyond? The veil creates an interior of sorts: a confinement, a *delimitado*, the briefest sliver of time or, in this case, space, a space that, by its very existence, continually puts off the imminent touching of presence and veil (of a present being and the veil that covers her). This hollow space between body and veil is indeed empty, but it is a pregnant emptiness, the space in which one effectuates a passage beyond oneself. And indeed, these are the very terms with which the monotheistic traditions have always treated their various veils, cloaks, garments. No less than al-Ghazali, dealing with the requirements of aspirancy and the disciplining of the soul, speaks of the need to create a “fortress” or “refuge,” in which the aspirant might hope to be approached by God, and “to be fit for His proximity” (1995, 88–89); and his instructions continue thus:

This can only be effected by going into a retreat in a darkened room, or, if no such place is available, then by pulling up one’s shirt so as to wrap the head in it, or by covering oneself with some other garment. At such times one may hear the call of the True God and behold the glory of the Lordly Presence. Do you not see that the Summons to God’s Emissary (may God bless him and grant him peace) reached him while he was in this state, so that it was said, *O thou*

wrapped one in thy raiment! and *O thou wrapped one in thy cloak!?* (al-Ghazali 1995, 91)²¹

Thus is a presence, through this spatial or this temporal veiling, put into a kind of contact with that which has not *yet* arrived, but which is just about to come, whose coming is almost-almost audible—and what is present thereby ceases to be such, inasmuch as, by this very process, this present hollows itself out—just as, in Sufism, the approach to the divine occurs by way of a realization, in the strictest sense of the term, of one's own nothingness.²²

This is the space-time constructed by Macabéa, the tiny interval between present and future, between the veil and the nothingness that it both conceals and gives forth. A meanwhile, an *enquanto*, of both space and time, in which each ceaselessly becomes the other. In this interval, in this imminence, we seem to finally *hear* Macabéa. But if she is no longer silent, what we hear is nonetheless not exactly her voice. What we hear—what we seem to discern, to make out, what we *almost-almost* hear—lies somewhere between voice and silence, beyond nothingness and yet not quite presence. Not so much Macabéa's voice, it is rather a murmur, a hum, a whisper of sorts—*rustling*, one that we almost-almost hear if we listen closely enough: *os sinos . . . mas sem que seus bronzes lhes dessem som . . . esta história . . . iminência . . . quase-quase*. The rustle of Macabéa—o sussurro de Macabéa—both revealed and concealed by the veils of this text (in the flappings, flutterings, of these veils), a rustle that seeks only to affirm, without reserve and without *reticence*. That says yes. That says yessssss . . . that says, with the very last word of the text: *Sim. Ssssssim*.



NOTES

1. I take this translation from the Douay-Rheims Bible, itself a translation of the Vulgate.
2. Indeed, Macabéa's name inscribes her not only within the story of the Maccabees, but within the entire tradition of Judaism. As befitting Lispector, though, it does so in an enigmatic way. The original Hebrew text of I Maccabees, after all, is lost; all that remains to us is the Greek translation contained in the Septuagint (II-IV Maccabees, on the other

hand, were originally written in Greek). Macabéa, therefore, would be the inheritor of a lost writing: she inherits a story of revolt, but one told in the language of the other, the language of a hostile other. On the subject of Lispector's relationship to Judaism, see especially the work of Vieira (2010, 1996) and Moser (2009).

3. The text refers to those "many of Israel" (1 : 45) who obeyed the Greek king Antiochus's command to "leave their children uncircumcised, and let their souls be defiled with all uncleannesses, and abominations, to the end that they should forget the law, and should change all the justifications of God" (1 : 51); we read that "the city [Jerusalem] was made the habitation to strangers, and she became a stranger to her own seed, and her children forsook her." (1 : 40)
4. Vieira, in this passage, is commenting on Jonathan A. Goldstein's translation of *I Maccabees*, and taking up a suggestion from Goldstein.
5. As an aside, there is much to be said not only about Macabéa's name, but also the names of the novel's other characters—Glória, Olímpico, the four Marias ("Maria da Penha, Maria Aparecida, Maria José and plain Maria," [31]), Rodrigo S. M.
6. Though for an interesting discussion that considers the relationship between Fanon's chapter on the veil and post-Heideggerian philosophy—specifically, Derrida's early work—see Mowitt (2007).
7. Indeed, Fanon (1968), in "L'Algérie se dévoile," the opening chapter of his *Sociologie d'une révolution (L'an V de la révolution algérienne)*, argues that it is the colonial mindset that insists on this dichotomous view of the veil: *either* an exoticism that wishes to keep the Algerian woman veiled, because what is hidden excites, *or* a mindset posing as emancipatory that demands the unveiling of the woman in the interest of her freedom, but which in fact, for Fanon, arises out of a voyeuristic impulse.
8. One thinks here also of Cixous's short text "Savoir," published jointly with Derrida's "Un ver à soie" in their 1998 book *Voiles*, which tells the story of an operation Cixous herself underwent to correct her myopia: her initial joy at being able to "*voir-à-l'oeil-nu*" (1998, 16) is later tempered by what she experiences as the loss of her myopia, the loss of an *inability to see*, of a veiled vision, which was, for Cixous, central to her creativity, that very element that made her vision unique.
9. This veil revealing and concealing nothingness calls to mind another veil, the one analyzed by Derrida in *Glas*, the veil that "opens onto nothing, encloses nothing":

Nothing behind the curtains. Hence the ingenuous surprise of the non-Jew when he opens, when he is allowed to open or when he violates the tabernacle, when he enters the dwelling or the temple and after so many ritual detours to reach the secret center, he discovers nothing – only nothingness. (1986, 49)

10. We should make note here of an interesting difference between the masculine and the feminine in Lispector's novel, a difference specifically concerning secrecy. The main male

character, Olímpico (Macabéa's boyfriend for a time), also has a secret: "he had killed a rival in the heart of the backwoods: his long, sharp knife had punctured his victim's soft liver with the greatest ease. He had kept this crime a secret [*Guardava disso segredo absoluto*], and he enjoyed that sense of power which secrecy can bestow" (1992, 57). Unlike Macabéa's secret, then, Olímpico's secret is known to him; it is composed of everyday words that can be spoken, communicated; he simply chooses not to do so, to keep these words for himself. This masculine secret has a different relationship to language and to knowledge. Likewise, Olímpico's "veils" (though as we shall see, the word does not really fit here) are very different from those of Macabéa. On their third meeting, we learn that Olímpico drops "that superficial veneer of politeness [*o leve verniz de finura*] that his stepfather had inculcated with some effort" (43–44). Olímpico's truth, therefore, lies not in that which conceals, but behind it; and hence we are much closer, with this male character, to the way we are accustomed to thinking about the relationship between truth and its veils.

11. Duras's *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* is likewise narrated by a man, and Blanchot comments on this in the final footnote of his essay.
12. One could make a similar argument, I believe, for Duras's novel.
13. On Líspector's innovative use of punctuation, see Sweet (2008); see also Líspector's own comments on the matter, quoted in Moser (2009, 209).
14. Indeed, Pontiero translates the "*Quanto ao presente*" of this sentence as "As for your immediate future." I have modified this translation, without meaning this as a criticism of Pontiero: the fact that the fortune-teller uses the word "*presente*" to relate the immediate future indicates above all the malleability of the term "present," its constant slippage toward the future; one need only think here of the adverb "presently," as in "she will arrive presently."
15. I should note that the entire novel is punctuated by these "bangs" ("*explosões*"), always in parentheses. I will speak briefly of these explosions toward the end of the essay, but for now let me simply note the obvious resonance with Benjamin's call to "blast open the continuum of history."
16. And it is interesting that all this is occurring in the twilight, the "twilight that belongs to no one [*crepúsculo que é hora de ninguém*]" (1992, 78), the hour at which the stars have *not yet arrived* . . . While I cannot really do so in this essay, there is much to be said here about the figure of the star, and specifically its weakness (could one even make out the stars above the glaring light of Rio, this city so huge that it is almost a planet?) or even its loss. Elsewhere, Líspector writes: "In prehistory I had begun my march through the desert, and without a star to guide me, only perdition guiding me, only error guiding me" (1988, 129–30). Stars, for Líspector, are never anything more than exceedingly weak guides, just as a weak messianism would give rise to only the faintest of calls. Yet it is precisely this weakness that gives hope: in the passage I have just cited, it is precisely the narrator's starlessness—her perdition, her error—that leads her to the greatest discovery of all, "the hidden secret," "the most remote secret in the world . . . sparkling there in a glory that hurt my eyes" (1988, 130).

17. For a discussion of messianism in Lispector, see João Camillo Penna (2010), especially 90–91.
18. Of course, rather than italicizing the word “weak” here, I should, strictly speaking, follow the German practice (as Benjamin does) of *spacing* for emphasis: what we read in the original is not *schwache* but s c h w a c h e. Agamben (2005, see especially 138–145) makes very interesting comments about this practice specifically as it relates to messianism in Benjamin.
19. See, for example, what she writes on the “instant” and the “now” in *The Passion According to G.H.*: “the instant, the very instant—the right now [*a actualidade*]*—that is unimaginable, between the right now and the I there is no space: it is just now, inside me*” (1988, 70).
20. This is reminiscent of the way Cohen and Zagury-Orly describe the conjunction of present and future in Derrida’s “messianicity”: “la *messianicité*,” they write, “nous exposerait à . . . ce qui ne serait pas présent en chair et en os et qui pourtant s’adresserait toujours déjà à nous” (2008, 169).
21. I thank Roshan A. Jahangeer for bringing my attention to these passages.
22. As Jahangeer writes: “This is the ultimate aim of those who tread the path of Sufism . . . they seek to have direct knowledge of God through a personal interaction with the Divine by realizing their own nothingness before Him” (2010, 8).

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